

Keeping the Historic House

A Plan

Preserving historic houses and opening them to the public has a long tradition in the United States. We visit these sites to experience our past and learn where we have come from as a nation. The National Park Service preserves and interprets the homes of our presidents, military leaders, authors, scientists, and inventors. These sites can be visited and the lives of their inhabitants made authentic to us. In addition, there is a growing trend to balance our view of the past by preserving the homes and presenting the lives of those who labored to build our heritage such as farmers, coal miners, slaves, and domestic servants. Our knowledge of the past is enriched by looking through these windows into another time and into other lives.

The historic houses we visit were never intended to have hundreds and even thousands of visitors pass through their doors every year. Consequently, they suffer from the stresses of this access. On a structural level, the strain may cause staircases to sag, joists to weaken, and ceilings to fall from too much vibration and weight overhead. Interior furnishings deteriorate in the light that visitors need to view the contents. There is rapid accumulation of dust, most of which is carried in by the visitor, as well as air pollution caused by the cars or buses that bring them to the

site, and the encroaching cities. The awful irony of the historic house is that by giving the visitor the opportunity to experience the past, the visitor causes irreparable harm to the site by being there.

A Preservation Approach

Careful monitoring and preventive conservation practices can keep the impact of the visitor to a minimum, and keep the houses accessible to future generations. Sensible rules governing the length of time for daily opening, the number of days a year to open a site, and the number people permitted in the house at one time will alleviate many of the structural strains. Good building maintenance practices compliment these measures to ensure that the building structure is stable and able to provide protection for the collections housed within.

Preserving the interior furnishings is accomplished through the control of light, dust, environment, and careful artifact handling and cleaning practices. Unfortunately, the significance of some historic house collections has been jeopardized by prolonged exposure to light, unstable environmental conditions, pest infestation and air pollution. Sadly, these conditions are of recent origin. The original owners and occupants of these houses knew how damaging light and dust could be and they carefully protected a house's contents. It is interesting to look back at historic housekeeping practices to note how well drawing the blinds against sunlight, fitting furniture with loose covers, and protecting carpets with a runner over high traffic areas preserved a family's cherished possessions.

Where We Erred

Over time, tastes changed so that people preferred interiors that were light and airy. But the textiles, furniture, watercolors and other fragile organic materials that decorated these interiors were damaged by this change in environment. Failure to maintain and use shutters and close blinds allowed more light into a room which damaged the drapes, bleached out the furniture, and faded colored textiles. It caused rooms to heat up as the sun beat through the windows and

The light coming into the room is reduced through the use of shades. Note that the slats are angled to reduce light levels even further. Photo courtesy NPS.



altered the temperature and relative humidity for the collections. This change also gave the visitor a false impression of the period room interior as the occupants lived in it.

This change in historic housekeeping routines was accompanied by a change in cleaning practices that further contributed to the deterioration of the household collections. Powerful vacuum cleaners, spray furniture polishes, and creams in a tube to polish silver and other metals are modern labor saving products. However, when they are applied to pieces of decorative or fine art, they are aggressive and can damage an object. To prolong the survival of interiors and collections, specialized hand cleaning techniques that are considerably slower than those we use at home have to be used in historic houses.

A Preventive Care Plan

It may seem like an overwhelming task to maintain an aging structure filled with thousands of sensitive objects. Yet the job can be made manageable through a detailed housekeeping or preventive care plan. Such a plan suggests daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual inspection routines and cleaning activities. It also provides instructions for cleaning the types of materials found in the house. Developing an effective plan that staff will follow is a team effort. Administrators, curators, conservators, housekeeping staff, interpreters, and maintenance workers all have a role in devising a plan that will work for the site, not over burden the staff or stress the budget.

Team planning is essential to ensure that sound preservation practices are followed in a consistent manner. Should one part of the plan not be followed, undoubtedly the neglect will impact on some other aspect of the house or its collections. A site that has neglected to clean the gutters regularly may find the ceiling plaster in a room begin to spall from the dampness, the relative humidity levels in the room rise, and moisture sensitive materials begin to swell. Routine monitoring and maintenance of the building must be integrated into the routine monitoring and maintenance of the collections and all of these activities should be written down in the housekeeping plan.

A successful plan has three elements: documentation, a schedule, and accomplishments. It will stress preventive care measures and recognize that these measures vary by season. The collections are best served by a well-maintained build-

ing. It is important to monitor the building envelope and the mechanical systems, and to make repairs before a problem occurs. The interior preventive care regime begins by keeping dust, light, and pests out of the house. That means mats at the entry, shades, shutters or blinds at the windows that are closed when the sun is bright, and sweeps at the doors. The temperature and relative humidity should be monitored and controlled to whatever extent is possible given site conditions. Perhaps fans are needed to circulate air in the humid summer or humidifiers are necessary in winter if there is central heating and the relative humidity levels fall too low for the safety of the collections. It is not the intention of this article to develop a housekeeping plan but rather to illustrate that the plan should be comprehensive, and that it includes more than just cleaning the house.

An alert and trained staff is essential to preserve and manage a historic house. This is where the conservation community can have a critical role in housekeeping. Objects often come into a conservation laboratory because they were damaged or improperly cleaned while being routinely maintained. Conservators can offer advice to a site on how to care and manage the preservation of collections and provide on-site training for staff on safe handling and care practices.

All staff members have a role in the preservation program and their roles are interdependent. Everyone needs to work together because their specific work impacts the work of others. Working in teams and staff cross training will enhance perspectives by allowing people to appreciate everyone's role, and understand the workload of others, as well as the constraints they work under. Effective methods of communication are needed since staff may not work the same hours or days.

Objectives

Ultimately, the goal of an effective preventive care plan is to maintain collections while ensuring that they will be available for future generations. At the same time, we use these objects to tell a story and give the visitor a sense of a person, an occupation, a lifestyle or another time. Our success is essential to the continued access and appreciation of our past.

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